

The Importance of the School Strengthening Work Plan

A Tip Sheet for the DC CoP

Developing and implementing a School Strengthening Work Plan (SSWP) is foundational in order for schools to provide comprehensive school behavioral health supports to students and their caregivers.

We thank Andre F. Edwards, LICSW, School Behavioral Health Expansion Clinical Specialist, DC Department of Behavioral Health (DBH), for sharing the lessons learned gathered by DBH from schools using the School Strengthening Tool (SST) to develop their SSWP at the May 2021 DC CoP monthly meeting. We also thank the teams from MacFarland Middle School/Mary's Center and Garfield Elementary School/Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington for sharing advice on what they believe is needed for other schools to create effective work plans.

The SSWP is a collaborative process to guide a school's implementation of multi-tiered behavioral health supports. This process is driven by the School Behavioral Health Coordinator and other school staff, and supported by the full school behavioral health team of providers at each school.

The School Strengthening Tool and Work Plan (SSTWP) are a self-assessment and planning guide that enables school teams to:

- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the school's policies and programs for promoting health, engagement, and safety;
- Reflect on the school's level of preparation and capacity for the effective implementation of school behavioral health best practices to achieve school-wide goals;
- Develop an action plan for improving student health, engagement, and safety; and
- Involve teachers, parents, students, and the community in improving school policies, programs, and services.

The SSTWP were adapted from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's \(CDC\) School Health Index](#) and embrace the [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child \(WSCC\) model](#). This is an internal process completed by an existing or newly formed School Behavioral Health Team that includes school-based staff and key community stakeholders. While this work plan is required for schools participating in the District's School Behavioral Health Expansion, all schools are invited to use it to aid in planning for the upcoming school year.

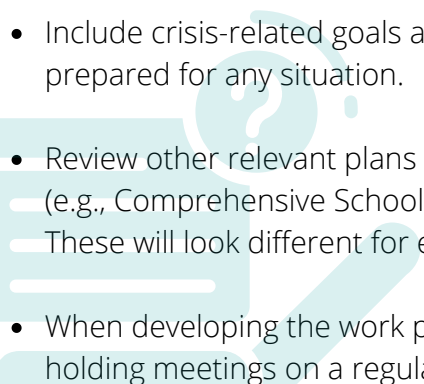
In order to most effectively utilize the SST and SSWP tools, all members of a school's behavioral health team should be included and engaged to ensure representation by all roles and their diverse perspectives. It is also important to include families/caregivers in the development of the work plan to ensure their perspectives are represented in the school's final goals and activities.



Guidance When Using the School Strengthening Tool

- While completing the SST as a team, use the four domain modules to understand what the school is already doing, the readiness rubric to understand the school infrastructure and commitment, and the open-ended questions to collect as much explanatory information as possible to inform the work plan.
- The SST is a tool for growing and learning and should not be viewed as punitive. It provides data at the beginning of the school year to help school and CBO staff understand where improvements can be made in the school's behavioral health system.
- The SST helps develop both short-term and long-term plans for improvement. For instance, if gaps in the delivery of services are identified, an immediate goal could be a focus on certain subpopulations within the school who are most in need (e.g., LGBTQ+ and/or Spanish-speaking students), while working on the longer term goal of setting up a system to deliver services effectively.

Guidance When Creating Your School Strengthening Work Plan

- The SSWP should not be developed in a silo, nor should it communicate the work of one person or partner organization. School Behavioral Health Coordinators should include stakeholders from across the school community to ensure buy-in and to build as effective a plan as possible that operationalizes the priorities and collective work of the full team for the current school year.
 - School Behavioral Health Coordinators should coordinate the creation and implementation of the SSWP because they have access and authority in their roles to bring together the key players needed to ensure effective behavioral health supports in their school.
 - Staff wellness should be included as part of the SSWP; staff who are less stressed and feel supported are better able to assist students. See [OSSE resources](#) and this [Padlet](#).
 - Include crisis-related goals at tiers 1, 2 and 3 in the work plan so the school is prepared for any situation.
 - Review other relevant plans to align the work plan to District, LEA, and school priorities (e.g., Comprehensive School Plans, Trauma Responsive Schools Non-Negotiables). These will look different for each school.
 - When developing the work plan, keep momentum going and teammates engaged by holding meetings on a regular basis.
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Advice from School Teams

- **Be intentional about building community:** Make time to connect personally with teammates. Prioritize relationship-building and start meetings with mindfulness moments or icebreaker activities to get to know each other.
- **Trust is essential:** Create a high-functioning team where people feel free to brainstorm, be solution-focused, and collaborate.
- **Share leadership:** Take turns leading check-ins and planning meetings. Utilize one another's strengths to reduce burden on any one person.
- **Communicate regularly:** Continue collaboration outside of meetings through emails, text chains, drop-in meetings, and phone calls.
- **Reflect before you begin:** Consider the school culture. Pose questions to your team and other stakeholders such as "Who are we?", "What are our strengths?" and "What are our growth opportunities?" What engagement and communication strategies does the school use to promote behavioral health services to all youth and families? Where do youth and families go to learn about activities and services at the school?
- **Work together:** Use the SST to identify shared priorities and foster collaboration on issues such as family engagement or establishing student work groups.
- **Be flexible:** Keep expectations realistic on what can be accomplished when building your SSWP because interruptions to workflow due to various situations are inevitable.
- **Integrate your plan:** Review your work plan in the context of your school's comprehensive plan and be sure to align your work with any behavioral goals within that plan. If applicable, also align your work with the behavioral health goals set by your LEA.

If you need assistance with your SSWP, please contact your Clinical Specialist. If you do not know who your assigned Clinical Specialist is, please contact Nicole Denny at nicole.denny@dc.gov.

Tools to Foster Collaboration Within and Across Teams:

- [Four Simple Questions](#)
- [Defining Our Core](#)
- [Learning the Language, Making the Connections](#)

Please visit the [Padlet](#) created by MacFarland Elementary School on their successful teaming.

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